United Nations E/2010/NGO/26

Economic and Social Council

Distr: General
3 May 2010

Original: English

Substantive session of 2010
New York, 28 June-22 July 2010
Item 2 (c) of the provisional agenda*
Annual ministerial review: implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women

Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2010/100.

10-34190 (E) 140610

Please recycle

Statement

When mainstreaming isn't enough: the gendered barriers to achieving the Millennium Development Goals

Lois lives in Sierra Leone. As a small girl she was orphaned when both of her parents died in the war. With no income, no housing, and no vocational skills, she felt she had no other choice but to turn to sex work. She soon became pregnant. After her daughter's birth, life for Lois became increasingly difficult. She reached a breaking point when she began to feel as though she might have to abandon her daughter.

Ludmilla lives in the Republic of Moldova. Her father died when she was a young girl. Since then, her life, as she put it, has been a horror movie. Her mother left when Ludmilla was 13, leaving her to care for her six-year-old brother and two-year-old sister. A young girl herself, she was suddenly thrust into the role of mother and caregiver. With no one else to take care of her younger siblings, Ludmilla had to drop out of school.

A young Ethiopian woman was found in a dark hut where she had lain on a goatskin bed for many years suffering from an obstetric fistula. She had bed sores down to the bone. The young woman had lain still for so long hoping that she would stop leaking that she lost the use of her legs and could not walk. She was so psychologically depressed she did not speak.

These stories are not unusual. In conflict-ravaged Sierra Leone, 93 per cent of urban resident women and 94 per cent of rural women who are economically active are not paid; female-headed households are typically poorer than male-headed households. The Republic of Moldova is the poorest nation in Europe, as a result of the instability caused by the transition period in the 1990s. The Republic of Moldova has become one of the leading source countries for human trafficking, with women and girls at particular risk. The economic situation is so dire that 70 per cent of adolescents think that working in the sex industry is a good way to earn money.

An in-depth study in Ethiopia found that women are seriously disadvantaged in education, economics, employment and health. A strong societal belief that women should marry young and assume household responsibilities is one of the primary factors leading to Ethiopia's striking gender gap.

Although gender has been mainstreamed into policies and political arenas, we still hear of such experiences, every day, in every country around the world.

Soroptimist International works to ensure that these stories stop, one woman and one girl at a time. We are approaching 90,000 Soroptimists, representing more than 3,000 local clubs in 124 countries/territories. Soroptimist International hears the voices of women and girls around the world and listens to their needs. We understand what works through our worldwide network of local and national projects and initiatives. As a global collective of women for women, we hold that empowering women, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, through vocational and life skills training and leadership and confidence-building (alongside the provision of opportunities), is the missing link to the achievement of all of the Millennium Development Goals.

This strategy has proved to be successful in the work of Soroptimist International around the world. The stories we shared earlier, in fact, all have happy endings. Lois from Sierra Leone became a participant in the Soroptimist partnered project "Project Sierra", which works to help disadvantaged women in the aftermath of conflict in Sierra Leone to face their futures with confidence through skills training. Lois graduated from the "Young mothers' programme" and is now working for the Sierra Leone police force, living independently and providing for her daughter. Her dream is to become a Sierra Leone policewoman in a United Nations peacekeeping mission for officers. Ludmilla was given the opportunity to participate in the Soroptimist project entitled "Hopes and dreams for everyone", which focuses on the prevention of human trafficking from the Republic of Moldova by providing life skills education and sustainable living conditions for vulnerable children. Ludmilla went back to school and finished with excellent grades. She has overcome the hardships and problems she faced and is now working towards getting a career. The young Ethiopian woman was brought to the Hamlin Fistula Hospital and joined the Soroptimist project entitled "Restoring dignity: securing a future", which focuses not only on physical healing but also on mental and emotional healing through education and vocational training. After months of rehabilitation and physiotherapy she began to come alive again. She has begun to talk and socialize and now walks and has learned to read and write. She is currently the official recordkeeper for the dairy and records the milk production from each cow every day.

These hopeful and happy endings have that missing link in common. They all address the root, underlying causes of gendered barriers to equality, in these cases, poverty, economic vulnerability, and health — in other words, a lack of skills, confidence, and opportunities. Soroptimist projects aim to empower women by identifying particularly vulnerable community members, learning about the barriers they face in their daily lives and providing the skills necessary to overcome the challenges that impede women and girls from achieving their full potential.

Soroptimist International posits that there are two primary aspects of the current approach to the Millennium Development Goals that present opportunities for improvement. First, we believe that the international community does not use the term "empowerment" consistently. Rather, it has come to mean many things for many different people; it is a term that is now commonly bandied about and is, unfortunately, losing its impact and meaning. Soroptimist International wishes to propose that the definition of empowerment include much more than simply a description of activities, such as ensuring that girls attend school, electing female politicians or offering employment opportunities to women. Rather, empowerment should refer to the process that leads up to those outcomes and during which women and girls are provided with the tools to take ownership of their own future. Empowerment should refer to offering women tangible skills and the confidence to use them. A woman or girl with a viable skill and the self-belief to use that skill is truly an empowered woman or girl. In this way, the empowerment, defined through the skills and confidence framework used by Soroptimist International, complements enabling, defined as changing the social, economic, political and cultural environments that present barriers to gender equality.

In short, we need to empower women and girls with skills and confidence and we need to enable communities to allow women and girls to participate meaningfully. To date, much of the meaningful and active focus of the Millennium

Development Goals has been on the enabling framework and not necessarily on the empowerment framework.

Second, Soroptimist International believes that the gendered barriers to achieving the Millennium Development Goals have been looked at in an isolated manner. When the international community talks about gender and the Millennium Development Goals, all too often it is only in reference to the Millennium Development Goals that specifically relate to women or girls (i.e., Goals 3 and 5). Yet the kind of empowerment advocated by Soroptimist must be part of the strategy to achieving every single one of the Millennium Development Goals. Poverty, education, child mortality, HIV/AIDS, malaria and other communicable diseases, and environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without empowering women and girls with skills and confidence. We know that addressing underlying social and economic determinants for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged will benefit everyone along the social gradient. Therefore, the best strategy for achieving all of the Millennium Development Goals is to empower the most vulnerable women and girls by addressing underlying social and economic determinants, a strategy that, to date, has also not meaningfully been at the forefront of the work to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

With this background in mind, Soroptimist International wishes to make the following recommendations to the Economic and Social Council, as the international development community bands together in the final five-year push to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015:

- The international community should come to a consensus on the meaning of the term "empowerment", using the skills and confidence framework proposed by Soroptimist International.
- The commitments in the Beijing Platform for Action should remain at the forefront of the discussions and decisions relating to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.
- The meaning of "empowerment" should be translated into best practices, with a shared framework of measurements and outcomes, implemented both within and across all sectors involved in international development.
- "Gender equality" should not become synonymous with "women's equality". Empowering women and girls without involving men and boys will achieve minimal, short-term results. Men and boys must be an integral part of empowerment programmes as we work to address the underlying social and economic determinants of the vulnerabilities of women and girls.
- The international community should continue to pay special attention to the global economic crisis and its impact on vulnerable communities, particularly women working in the informal and/or agricultural sector. There is a grave danger that the strides we have made will be reversed in the light of the current global financial climate.
- International non-governmental organizations should progress further in focusing on partnering with local community-based organizations in order to build ownership and capacity and to involve and listen to the voices of women and girls. Development simply is not possible without including those affected by the decisions in the decisions.